

U. S. Hoping Laos Peace Will Seal Off S. Viet Nam

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Kennedy administration policy experts privately feel the real gain in the formation of the long-sought coalition government in Laos will be minimize Communist infiltration into neighboring South Viet Nam.

Laos has a common border with both North and South Viet Nam. Under the Geneva accords that led to the coalition government scheduled to take over in Laos Monday, infiltration by Communist North Vietnamese guerrillas through Laos and into South Viet Nam is supposed to stop. Officials here are not optimistic that it will stop, but they believe it can be held to a trickle.

The establishment of a neutral Laos, they think, has ruled out the possibility of any large-scale movement of supplies and men through the flat, open plains of southern Laos. Infiltration through the mountain trails in the northeast may continue, it is believed, but no heavy supplies can be moved over the narrow trails. The result, officials feel, will be reflected in the struggle for South Viet Nam.

U. S. Turnaround

This is one of the brighter sides of the picture in Laos, which has otherwise been an almost continual thorn in the side of President Kennedy from the day he took office.

It is a story heavy with irony, since the United States, after \$300 million and eight turbulent years, is back in the position of supporting a government headed by Neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma, whom the U. S. helped overthrow two years ago.

And the "strong man," Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, whom the Central Intelligence Agency supported in the 1960 coup against Souvanna, has drawn the strong criticism of Mr. Kennedy for allegedly stalling efforts to form a neutral government and attempting to drag the U. S. into an armed conflict.

Now the coalition government has been formed with

Souvanna as Premier, Gen. Phoumi as Deputy Premier, and pro-Communist Prince Souphanouvong also as Deputy Premier. U. S. officials are keeping their fingers crossed to see whether it will work.

Last May 17 the first of 5,000 Marines were ordered into Thailand to take up positions along the Mekong River bordering Laos. Should the Communist Pathet Lao fail to live up to their agreements in the new "neutral" Laos, the U. S. would once again have to face the question of whether to intervene militarily in Laos.

For all these reasons, Mr. Kennedy has hailed the formation of a neutral coalition in Laos in a cautious manner.